

State asks court for more time to deal with education budget

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SEATTLE (AP) - The Legislature needs more time to figure out a state education budget before it can properly reply to a contempt order from the Washington Supreme Court, the state attorney general told the high court Monday.

The Legislature ended its regular session on Friday and will reconvene on Wednesday in a special session.

In his written report, state Attorney General Bob Ferguson asked the court to wait until the special session has ended to decide whether to issue sanctions.

"Until the Legislature has concluded its work for 2015 and the governor has acted on the budget and any other education-related legislation that has passed both houses, the state cannot represent to the court whether actions taken this session achieve compliance with the court's orders," Ferguson said in the 13-page report.

The court ruled in September that the state was in contempt for failing to submit a complete plan for implementing its response to the 2012 McCleary decision that ordered more state funding for education.

The court gave the state until the end of the 2015 legislative session to finish its work before it would reconvene to consider whether sanctions were necessary.

Ferguson went on to outline the legislation still up for debate and to explain why it would fulfill the court's ruling.

Tom Ahearne, an attorney representing the coalition of teachers, school districts, parents and community groups that sued the state over school funding, was not impressed with Ferguson's report to the court. He said he had a sense of "deja vu."

"Today's filing is just one more illustration of the kick-the-can-down-the-road approach that the Washington Legislature's been using since before the McCleary and Venema families filed this suit over eight years ago," Ahearne said.

Lawmakers this year are tasked with writing a new two-year operating budget for the state under the shadow of the McCleary decision. Republicans and Democrats have different ideas about how to meet those goals.

Budget proposals in both houses set aside at least \$1.3 billion in new dollars for

education. Lawmakers in the House and Senate have also proposed changes to Washington's local school levy system to address another part of the McCleary decision.

Budget negotiators returned to the Capitol on Monday for a meeting with Gov. Jay Inslee ahead of the midweek start of the special session that could last up to 30 days.

The meeting, which included House and Senate leaders, was aimed at breaking the impasse that led to lawmakers adjourning their regular 105-day session two days early on Friday without a state operating budget.

After the meeting, Inslee spokesman David Postman said the governor sensed a "climate for compromise."

AP Correspondent Rachel La Corte contributed to this story from Olympia.